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## Formaldehyde causes cancer, EPA declares

**By Jonathan Tilove**

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WASHINGTON -- The EPA has concluded that **formaldehyde** is carcinogenic when inhaled by humans, a finding that could lead to stringent new regulations of the widely used chemical. Used in the production of countless consumer products, formaldehyde attained a degree of national infamy after Hurricane Katrina when some of those living in the 120,000 trailers provided by **FEMA** as temporary housing for storm victims reported respiratory and other health problems after prolonged exposure to the chemical, which is contained in wood products in the trailers. The EPA's draft assessment of the health perils of formaldehyde, released Wednesday, is now subject to 90 days of public comment and a nine-month peer review by a panel of the National Academy of Sciences, on its way likely to forming the basis for new regulation of formaldehyde levels in myriad products.



Susan Poag / The Times-Picayune

FEMA workers left, Megan Webbeking and Rachel Rodi distributed formaldehyde information in Ironton community in Plaquemines parish in 2007 as part of a statewide effort by FEMA for inform residents of FEMA provided housing units about formaldehyde in the trailers.

"There is sufficient evidence of a causal relationship between formaldehyde exposure and cancers of the upper respiratory tracts, with the strongest evidence for nasopharyngeal and sino-nasal cancers," the 1,043-page draft assessment concludes. "There is also sufficient evidence of a causal association between formaldehyde exposure and lymphohematopoietic cancers, with the strongest evidence of Hodgkin lymphoma and leukemia, particularly myeloid leukemia."

The EPA document also identifies seven other non-cancer health effects from formaldehyde inhalation: sensory irritation of the eyes, nose, and throat; upper respiratory tract pathology; pulmonary function; asthma and atopy; neurologic and behavioral toxicity; reproductive and developmental toxicity; and immunological toxicity.

Betsy Natz, executive of the Formaldehyde Council, representing leading formaldehyde producers and users in the United States, took issue with EPA's findings, contending that there is not a demonstrable link between formaldehyde and leukemia, or a causal link with nasopharyngeal and sino-nasal cancers.

"Any regulatory decision based on incomplete information could cause significant harm to an industry that supplies so many products critical to the home and commercial building, automotive and aerospace industries, as well as defense-related applications and vaccines used worldwide to prevent polio, cholera, diphtheria and other major diseases," Natz said.

But Becky Gillette of Eureka Springs, Ark., formaldehyde campaign director for the Sierra Club, said the pity of Wednesday's development was that it was so long in coming.

According to the EPA's chronology, the process that led to its draft assessment began in 1990.

"If this had taken even 'only' 10 years to develop regulations, the 120,000-plus families housed in FEMA trailers wouldn't have had to deal with illnesses from formaldehyde exposure in addition to trying to recover from losing everything in the hurricanes," Gillette said.

While the FEMA trailers called attention to the presence of formaldehyde in wood products, EPA identified the major source of formaldehyde emissions as motor vehicle exhaust, manufacturing plants, power plants, petroleum refineries, coking operations, incinerating, wood burning and tobacco smoke.

The National Academy panel will hold its first meeting on the draft assessment Monday in Washington. The panel is led by Jonathan Samet, a pulmonary physician and epidemiologist, who is a professor at the Keck School of Medicine at the University of Southern California. The vice chairman is Andrew Olshan, chairman of the Department of Epidemiology at the University of North Carolina's Gillings School of Global Public Health.

The new formaldehyde assessment comes as both the House and Senate appear poised to enact legislation, perhaps this month, setting new national standards for formaldehyde levels in composite wood products on a par with those established two years ago by the state of California. That legislation, backed by the Composite Panel Association and other wood industry groups, was reported out of the House Energy Committee last week on a 27-10 vote that included the support of both Reps. Charlie Melancon, D-Napoleonville, and Steve Scalise, R-Jefferson, one of three Republicans on the committee to vote yes.

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